

**From:** [Rivera, Alex](#)  
**To:** [Pierce, Jennifer](#)  
**Subject:** FW: St. Thomas Source: More Refinery Fumes, School Closings Raise Cries for Straight Answers  
**Date:** Friday, May 7, 2021 8:32:30 AM  
**Attachments:** [image001.png](#)  
[image002.jpg](#)

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Hi Jennifer:

We need to ask Sara to add a folder for articles like this right?

Thanks;

Alex

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**From:** Guerrero, Carmen <guerrero.carmen@epa.gov>  
**Sent:** Friday, May 07, 2021 6:54 AM  
**To:** Mugdan, Walter <Mugdan.Walter@epa.gov>; Williamson, Anahita <Williamson.Anahita@epa.gov>; Evangelista, Pat <Evangelista.Pat@epa.gov>; Prince, John <Prince.John@epa.gov>; Schaaf, Eric <Schaaf.Eric@epa.gov>; Simon, Paul <Simon.Paul@epa.gov>; LaPosta, Dore <LaPosta.Dore@epa.gov>; Anderson, Kate <Anderson.Kate@epa.gov>; Ruvo, Richard <Ruvo.Richard@epa.gov>; Laurita, Matthew <Laurita.Matthew@epa.gov>; Laureano, Javier <laureano.javier@epa.gov>; Gratz, Jeff <Gratz.Jeff@epa.gov>; Mears, Mary <Mears.Mary@epa.gov>; Rodriguez, Elias <Rodriguez.Elias@epa.gov>; Kluesner, Dave <kluesner.dave@epa.gov>; Bain, Zeno <Bain.Zeno@epa.gov>; Font, Jose <Font.Jose@epa.gov>; Rivera, Alex <Rivera.Alex@epa.gov>; Rodriguez, Nancy <Rodriguez.Nancy@epa.gov>  
**Subject:** Fwd: St. Thomas Source: More Refinery Fumes, School Closings Raise Cries for Straight Answers

Begin forwarded message:

**From:** "Shappert, Gretchen (USAVI)" <[Gretchen.Shappert@usdoj.gov](mailto:Gretchen.Shappert@usdoj.gov)>  
**Date:** May 7, 2021 at 5:06:49 AM AST  
**To:** "Amon, Tyler" <[Amon.Tyler@epa.gov](mailto:Amon.Tyler@epa.gov)>, "Guerrero, Carmen" <[guerrero.carmen@epa.gov](mailto:guerrero.carmen@epa.gov)>  
**Cc:** "Shappert, Gretchen (USAVI)" <[Gretchen.Shappert@usdoj.gov](mailto:Gretchen.Shappert@usdoj.gov)>  
**Subject:** St. Thomas Source: More Refinery Fumes, School Closings Raise Cries for Straight Answers

## More Refinery Fumes, School Closings

# Raise Cries for Straight Answers

[By Patricia Borns](#)

May 6, 2021

Phone calls about a powerful stench on St. Croix began flooding Hugh “Mr. P” Pemberton’s Reef radio show Wednesday morning. By Thursday morning the calls were still coming, as were calls to the Limetree Bay oil refinery, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Although a federal EPA investigation of the refinery was in progress at that moment, being conducted alongside local DPNR staff on the ground, the public had no answers until Thursday afternoon when the Department of Education announced early dismissals at three schools “due to a gaseous odor affecting the air quality on the campuses.” It was the second time in two weeks classes were dismissed due to a refinery emission.

Within half an hour, Limetree issued a press release apologizing for “light hydrocarbon odors” as a result of maintenance on the refinery’s coker unit. The release advised residents of the “potential for additional odors while maintenance continues.”

“The whole idea is the people want to know what they are smelling,” said Pemberton, who used to work at the refinery when it was owned by Hess Oil. “You can’t wait days until they get sick and fall down.”

## **20 hours of confusion**

But something just shy of that appeared to happen in the 20 or so hours that had residents reaching out to anyone who could help them to find out what was going on.

The confusion began on Wednesday when the refinery, responding to complaints, posted on Facebook, “Our preliminary investigations have revealed that units are operating normally and there is no activity that would result in an odor.”

St. Croix Administrator Sammuel Sanes said he was told the same thing.

“I have been getting complaints for the past couple of days and have been in touch with Limetree, but they say there is no activity that would cause

such an odor,” Sanes told the Source. “They said there is an asphalt plant nearby trying to start up that may be the cause, but I haven’t been able to get in touch with them.”

DPNR had also received numerous complaints on Wednesday and dispatched staff to investigate the problem, according to a spokesman, but there was no information on their findings. A Source email received no reply.

An EPA response team member and St. Croix native, Zeno Bane, urged community members to describe what they were smelling and any symptoms on a special phone line set up for refinery complaints, but by Thursday morning his voicemail was full.

Callers to the St. Croix Environmental Association variously reported a “gaseous” smell, “rotten eggs” or “burning rubber,” and symptoms of “headaches and nausea,” according to acting Executive Director Jennifer Valiulis. “If it’s maintenance, what about public notification or a schedule? Put out a VITEMA alert. At least there would be some understanding of where it’s coming from,” Valiulis said.

Still, with no answers, Pemberton drove into the field on his lunch break, first to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles which had closed due to the odor, then to the highway where the smell was “light” and on to the rum factory and container port where it was “powerful.” He was about to call in his findings to the station when Limetree’s press release identified the source, he said.

### **What is a coker unit?**

A coker unit, according to oil and gas literature, takes heavy residues and “cracks” them into smaller molecules to produce a very light crude. The walls of the vessels become gummed with carbon during this process, and when they’re cleaned, hydrocarbons can be released. Processing further down the line can release hydrogen sulfide if the pressure is too high, resulting in a flare.

Maintenance at refineries should not be releasing emissions that cause this scream level, according to Jane Williams, a clean air expert and executive director of California Communities Against Toxics.

“It is not normal. These are not odors, they are chemicals, and they should not be normalizing chemical exposure,” Williams said.

With other nonprofits who lobbied for the EPA's refinery investigation, Williams says she has "begged, pleaded, fussed and cajoled" the EPA to bring a sophisticated air monitor to St. Croix, called a UV-Hound, to get to the bottom of the problems.

Using technology similar to a radar gun, the Hound as it's known in geek circles, shoots the air and gives a reading at low detection levels in parts per billion, in real time.

"Your government should have had this equipment before the refinery opened," Williams said.

Pemberton agreed. "The government doesn't have to depend on the refinery for answers. You should have instruments from DPNR to tell where the smells are coming from."

### **Monitoring equipment coming to St. Croix**

In a statement Thursday evening, the EPA promised to bring monitoring equipment of some kind to St. Croix in the days ahead.

"EPA takes very seriously the reports from today and in recent weeks of children, families, and individuals becoming sickened by emissions around the Limetree Bay facility. ... To provide more immediate monitoring and to provide more information, EPA will be bringing monitoring equipment to St. Croix in the coming days, along with personnel to operate the monitors," the statement read in part.

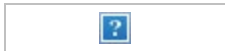
At the environmental groups' urging, EPA experts arrived on St. Croix on April 30 to gather information about recent incidents and conduct a preliminary assessment of the situation. Shortly after arriving, the agency cited Limetree with a Clean Air Act violation for not operating five community sulfur dioxide monitors as previously agreed to, and Limetree quickly agreed to repair and reactivate all five.

The EPA also requested all of the monitoring data available since the refinery restarted its operations to review its compliance with regulatory requirements at Flare #8, a suspected problem, and the fuel gas system. Limetree has not yet responded to the agency's information request, a spokesman said.

"If EPA makes a determination that the facility's operations present an imminent risk to people's health, consistent with its legal authorities, it

will take appropriate action to safeguard public safety,” the agency wrote.

Since arriving in the territory, the EPA has created a web page for the public where Limetree permits, actions and other information can be found at [www.epa.gov/vi/limetree-bay-terminals-and-limetree-bay-refining-llc](http://www.epa.gov/vi/limetree-bay-terminals-and-limetree-bay-refining-llc).



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